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SENSITIVE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [AF](#) [CA](#)

SUBJECT: CANADIANS AGAINST FUTURE AFGHAN ROLE

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Public opinion has turned "decisively" against Canada's military mission in Afghanistan, with more than 50 pct now opposing it, especially in the key electoral battleground provinces of Quebec, Ontario, and British Columbia, as well as in Atlantic Canada. A separate poll indicated that only 27 pct believe that Canadian troops should stay after the present mission ends in 2011, even in a non-combat role. Although Afghanistan is not likely to be a ballot box issue in the next federal election, these polls underscore the political constraints on both the Conservatives and the opposition Liberals in crafting post-2011 policy toward Afghanistan, and help to explain the reluctance thus far of either party to discuss future commitments. End summary.

¶2. (U) Ipsos Reid conducted a poll of 1,001 people across Canada between June 29 and July 6 on current attitudes toward the Canada's Afghan mission. EKOS Research Associates separately canvassed a larger sample of 2,713 respondents from July 8 to 14. Both polls recorded increased support for the Canadian Forces (CF) generally (82 pct compared to 77 pct in 2008), especially in Quebec, where support for the CF jumped to 76 pct from 58 pct. However, Ipsos Reid suggested that a majority of Canadians now believe that "we've fulfilled an obligation" and that the arrival of other [American] troops in Afghanistan means "that it is time to bring people home. . ."

A SLIDE IN SUPPORT

¶3. (U) EKOS reported a "steady and radical transformation" of public attitudes to the CF's mission in Afghanistan since 2002, noting that a slim majority (54 pct) of respondents now oppose it, compared to 34 pct who support it, along with 12 pct who are undecided. The mission now has the support of only 1:3 Canadians (compared to more than 2:3 in 2002). The strongest opposition is in Quebec (73 pct), Ontario (49 pct), British Columbia (49 pct), and Atlantic Canada (53 pct). Support is highest in Prime Minister Stephen Harper's home base of Alberta, at 42 pct, but 45 pct of Albertans now oppose it. Nationally, 60 pct of women strongly disapprove of the CF's mission, compared to 27 pct of women who believe that Canada should stay in Afghanistan.

¶4. (U) Ipsos Reid reported that support nationally for the current CF mission remains steady at 48 pct (down from 50 pct in January 2008), but that 52 pct of respondents now believe that Canada should withdraw all its troops when the mission ends in 2011. Only 27 pct think that Canadian troops should remain after 2011, even in a non-combat role. In contrast, in 2008, 37 pct of respondents had said that Canada should pull out all its troops after 2011, while 45 pct had said that they should stay for non-combat-related duties, including training Afghan security forces. Currently, only 14 pct favor extending the present mission (unchanged from 2008).

¶5. (U) Conservative Party voters remain the staunchest supporters of Canada's mission in Afghanistan, at 51 pct, compared to 31 pct of Liberal Party supporters, 26 pct of Green Party voters, 20 pct of New Democratic Party (NDP) voters, and 11 pct of Bloc Quebecois

supporters.

NOT A BALLOT BOX ISSUE

16. (U) In spite of the drift of support away from the Afghan mission, both pollsters confirmed that Afghanistan is not "an especially heavy load" on the governing Conservatives. Ipsos noted that the public essentially gave "the government its permission to continue" with the mission following the House of Commons' March 2008 bipartisan motion to end the combat mission in 2011. It was not a campaign issue in the October 2008 federal election.

17. (U) The EKOS poll indicated that the two major parties remain locked together in overall popular support, with the Conservatives marginally ahead at 34.1 pct compared to 32.4 pct for the Liberals, although the Conservatives trail slightly in vote-rich Ontario, and are a distant third behind the Liberals and the Bloc Quebecois in Quebec. EKOS noted that Canadians appear "relatively content" with the direction of the country (55 pct) and of the government (49 pct); only in Quebec did a majority believe that the government is heading in the wrong direction. Even among Liberal supporters, 41 pct believed that the Conservative government is heading in the right direction (compared to 48 pct in the wrong direction). However, EKOS argued that the current crop of parties and leaders still left voters "cold," suggesting that until Canadians see more vibrant political leadership, the political landscape is likely to remain "frozen."

18. (SBU) Comment: Although Afghanistan is not likely to be a ballot box issue in the next federal election (perhaps as early as fall 2009), the hardening of popular attitudes over the mission's end

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date in 2011 and growing unwillingness to contemplate a Canadian role in Afghanistan post-2011 impose significant constraints on public policy planning. As long as Canada's two main parties remain in a political stalemate with the public and neither likely to form a majority government after the next election, it will be virtually impossible for any government to commit to a combat role for the CF in Afghanistan after 2011 and difficult even to make firm decisions about other assistance beyond that date.

BREESE